THE

COMIC WORLD

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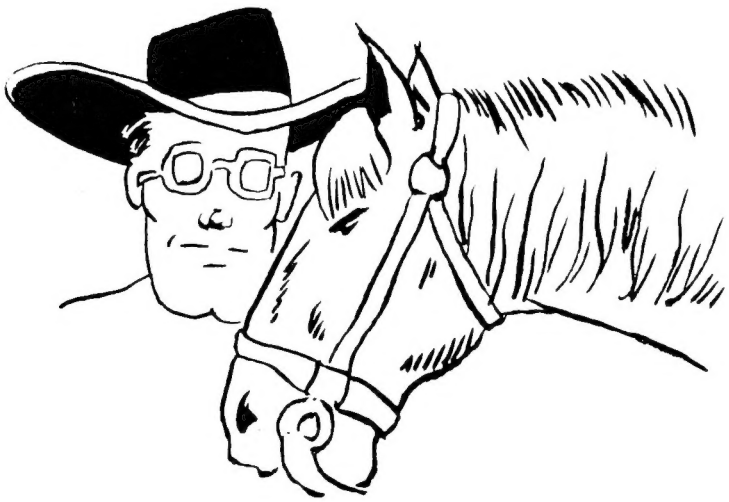
THE GHOST RIDER

by
Robert Jennings

Publishing companies, like people, have definite personalities. And like people, they have certain qualities and traits in which they seem to excell. With the comic publishing world, these special skills are evident in the type of comics which the company produces. Thus we have National Comics, which does its best work with heroic characters. For many years EC excelled primarily in horror and science fiction comics, while Fiction House made the bulk of their fortune with jungle titles, and Dell was content to dominate the funny animal market with their well drawn cartoon series.

For many years there existed a company which called itself Magazine Enterprises, and as far as I've been able to learn, they published war comics and scattered cartoon and detective comics during most of their early years. But in 1948, a transformation took place. The company issued a few widely scattered titles, gropping



The Calico Kid

The Mysterious Stranger

for the speciality media its artists and writers seemed best suited for. By 1950 the company had adopted a new seal (featured prominently on nearly all their comic titles) and had discovered that westerns were their speciality; westerns with a unique flair for weirdness and high adventure seldom if ever, encountered in western comics before. Their most magnificent creation was a character known as the Ghost Rider.

The Ghost Rider was probably the most unusual and interesting western character ever published. He bridged the gap between the strict, regimented, traditional western adventure, and the supernatural weird tale in a blend of excellent writing and art that has never been matched before or since. He held solid reign over an empire of enthusiastic readers from his first appearance in 1950 until he closed his final story in 1955, and the memory of his passing is burned solidly into the minds of all that encountered him.

But at best Ghost Rider's beginnings were humble. ME had a formula for comic sucess during those early days under their new seal. A part of it involved contracting popular movie stars and well liked radio programs, and turning these creations into comic book adventures. The name of the famous star, or nationally known radio program was prominently featured on the cover, often accompanied with full color photographs whenever possible. Attracted by the fame of the character, youthful readers were soon snared by the brilliant artwork and the well presented story plots they found inside.

One of these comics was titled TIM HOLT, and made its first appearance in 1948. Tim Holt, as any good Saturday movie goer can tell you, was the star of many a B-Grade RKO thriller. In the sixth issue of TIM HOLT, a young and largely unknown artist named Dick

Ayers introduced the first adventure of a new western series titled The Calico Kid.

It's hard to imagine so glamerous and mysterious a western crime fighter as the Ghost Rider emerging from the adventures of the Calico Kid. The Calico Kid was the most un-heroic, un-imaginative, and un-mysterious western hero ME ever produced, bar none. The hero of the stories was a nameless individual known as the Calico Kid, a traveling cloth salesman for the California Calico Company. He roamed the west in a covered wagon pulled by a great black stallion (disguised as a common work horse). The Kid himself wore thick glasses, a ridiculous hat and a long blue-black smock that completely covered his heavily muscelled arms and his ready gunbelt. In appearance he resembled a poorly drawn Clark Kent dressed in a painter's smock. And like the alter-identity of Superman fame, the Calico Kid pretended to be a complete and total coward.

When Trouble struck nearby, (usually in and about a place known as Canyon City), the Kid speedily shed his smock and glasses, unhitched the stallion and became the mysterious and equally unknown stranger. He swooped down on evil doers in the midst of their crimes with six-guns blazing, metting out raw justice for their wrongs, then disappeared into the shadows to resume his existence as the cowardly Calico Kid. The mysterious stranger did not make a great many appearances, once in a story for five or six panels was considered more than sufficent to demonstrate his prowness with justice. The bulk of each story concerned the events leading up to the appearance of the mysterious stranger, and the normal life of the Calico Kid.

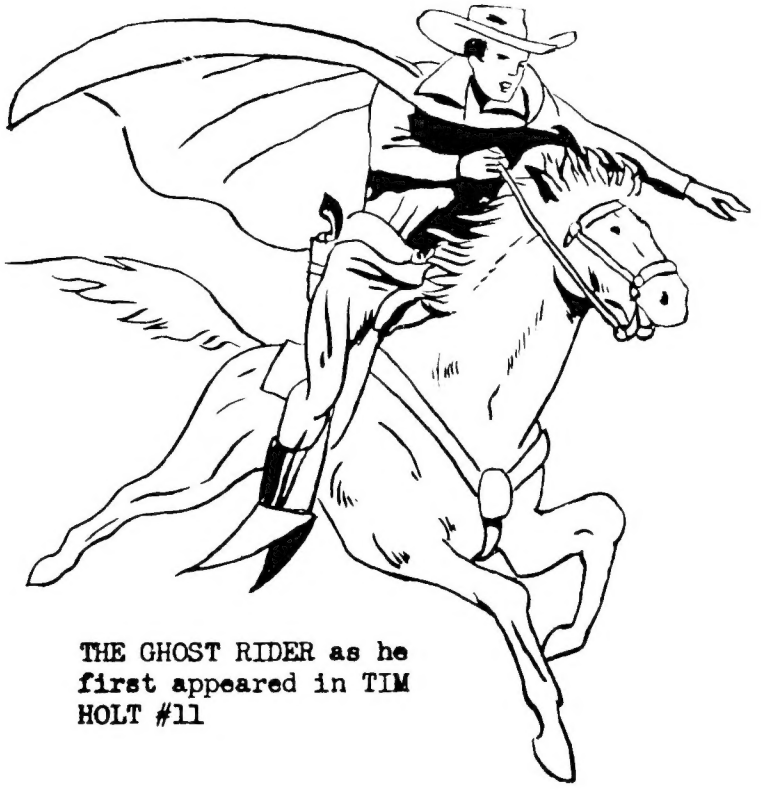
The artwork for the Calico Kid, as with many other early ME westerns was, putting it mildly, crude to the extreme. The stories themselves were second rate, with little real plotting or character development. The mysterious stranger was a shifting shadow without form or personality, while the Calico Kid, with slightly better development, still emerged as a cardboardish and dull character, and most unappealing.

Then too, the basic framework of the series could be easily questioned. There was no logical reason why the Calico Kid should even be in existence. It is seldom that a western hero needs <u>any</u> type of disguise, and in the Kid's case, the existence of twin identities was confusing and useless. The Calico Kid could have accomplished more good had he shed his cowardly counter-part and become the mysterious stranger perminently. Yet for some unknown reason, it was the daylight identity that was considered essential, and the mysterious stranger who was largely ignored. The stories never bothered to mention why the Kid's disguise was necessary, and why the mysterious stranger could not right wrongs openly, without the clumsy and no doubt offensive disguise he wore while not in action.

The Calico Kid was not exactly the type of hero to stur the imagination and thrill the emotions. A secret identity hero with less than medocre plotting and poor artwork, he was doomed to tragic failure almost since his first appearance. The only items in his brief history worth noting are the fact that it was the Calico Kid who adopted Sing Song (later to become Ghost Rider's daylight-identity sidekick) in the Kid's first adventure, and that the Kid eventually evolved into the Ghost Rider.

Eventually it must have dawned on Ayers and the editors at ME that the Calico Kid was not exactly what they were looking for, and the agile brain of Richard Ayers concocted another hero, one who was more colorful and much more interesting than the cowardly Calico Kid had been. With the 11th issue of TIM HOLT, a brand new character known as the Ghost Rider made his first appearance. In order to make the transition complete, Ayers turned the cowardly Calico Kid into the gallant Ghost Rider.

Villain Bart Lasher, disguised as an Indian and leading a band of renagades, has attacked the wagon of the Calico Kid. Ebony, the Kid's great black stallion



THE GHOST RIDER as he first appeared in TIM HOLT #11

falls dead with an arrow in his ribs, and the wagon overturns. Shedding his disguise the Calico Kid and Sing Song prepare to fight to the very death. "If you red devils would lay off the fire-water ---you wouldn't go crazy like this", shouts the Kid as he battles the savage attackers. But alas, the human tide crushes resistence, and the Kid and Sing Song are captured, alive.

We learn that the Calico Kid has really been Rex Fury, Federal Marshall, all along, and that he has been hot on the trail of Bart Lasher for some time. "You're turning in your badge now Fury...with your boots on!" snarls Bart Lasher as the tightly bound forms of Rex Fury and Sing Song are thrown into the Devil's Sink, a massive whirl-pool at the bottom of a water fall, from which nothing has ever emerged.

Except out heroes. Unknown to Lasher, at the end of the funnel and under the cliff, is a cavern, and here come to rest the brused and battered bodies of Rex Fury and his Chinese sidekick. The walls and walkways of the cavern are strown with the bones and broken remains of other objects caught in the whirlpool's savage maile. Satisfied that all is right with the world again, Bart Lasher decides to raid the Widow Ames's place the next night.

But Rex Fury has other ideas. Riding a pure white horse, smeared with phosphrous white paint and sporting a flapping white cloat, Rex Fury's "ghost" causes complete panic, as the superstitious Indians flee to the foothills in one direction, while Bart Lasher, with Rex Fury close at his heels, flee the other way. At a fateful turn of the road, Destiny plays the last card. Lasher's pony stumbles, sending his body hurtling to the ground to lay dead, impaled on a broken spoke from the Calico Kid's wrecked wagon.

It wasn't exactly an impressive debut, as comics go, but it was a beginning. The next issue of TIM HOLT saw the Ghost Rider in his first real costume. It was still very crude. A flap of cloth, presumably attached somehow to his white stetson, fell over his face, hiding the features. Pale flesh could still be seen about the ears and neck, where the cloth didn't cover, and the ranch styled shirt, with every button on it plainly visible, is also still evident. Issue #13 saw further development in the costume, and in the background artwork. Ghost Rider still featured such unconventional items as neatly pressed pants, and his mask, which now covered all his head and resembled faintly the skull mask he was to adopt in later issues, still appeared artificial, but with only a few minor improvements in artwork, the Ghost Rider's appearance was complete.

Whereas in the Calico Kid the mundane identity had predominated, with the Ghost

Rider Tales, the daylight alter ego generally played only a supporting role. Rex Fury, thundering federal marshal played a part in the stories, but it was the Ghost Rider which made them complete, and whose character was most predominate. In some stories, especially toward the latter part of the series, the Ghost Rider's daylight alter ego is never even mentioned. The reasons should be obvious. The comic stands were clogged with westerns and western heroes by the time ME and the Ghost Rider made their twin bids for power. To stand out on the crowded comic rack, and to produce continued sales, a western comic had to attract and hold reader interest. A federal marshal, even one as brave and intelligent as Rex Fury was, could not hope to match stories with adventure, excellent art, good plotwork, dominated by a magnetic character noted for his cunning and ingenous supernatureal abilities. Then too, readers probably would have preferred to see more of the Ghost Rider than Rex Fury, who was at best, a talented ordinary human.

Ghost Rider as he appeared in TIM HOLT #12

These factors could be illustrated even more dramatically by pointing out that when Dick Ayers moved from ME to Atlas, he did all the artwork for their Wyatt Earp comic character. The art was very good, and the stories, while suffering from the traditional Atlas fault of being mere incidents instead of complete stories, were not bad. But the comic somehow didn't make the grade. The magnificent Ghost Rider, the weird story backgrounds and the excellent art all happened to combine in just the right way to attract and hold readers.

But there were many fictional advantages to being known as the Ghost Rider also. It became evident as the stories progressed, that while criminals held little real guilt for their crimes, almost all of them were consumed with a burning fear that they would be exposed and made to pay for their wrongdoings. Rex Fury, Federal Marshal, was just a flesh and blood man, one who would have to search down tangible clues before he could ever hope to confront the guilty person or bring his case into court. The Ghost Rider acted as a strang fear symbol. Few persons like to believe in ghosts, especially if you happen to be a comic book villain and the living ghost happens to fight for justice. Rex Fury was just one more man in a long line of men who opposed the villains, but the Ghost Rider was the living force of supernatural Justice risen to avenge the oppressed victims. Fury, acting as the Ghost Rider, could use the tiny tell-tale clues which cleverly revealed the guilt of a person, (but weren't substantial enough to stand up in a court of law), to focus the guilt and fear of the evil doers, and force them to make a fatle slip, or a full confession.

The Ghost Rider used many means to accomplish his ends. He appeared only with

A facial view of the Ghost Rider taken from TIM HOLT #17. Note the difference in the skull mask as seen in this illustration, and the skull mask in its final development, seen below. In general Dick Ayers avoided close facial shots whenever possible.

the darkness, as could only be expected of a ghost, and rode the trail of evil-doers in a pure white phospherous stained costume, with a skull mask that hid his features, and a magnificent flapping cloat that flared out behind him as he galloped across the moon-lit praire astride his silver stallion, Spectre.

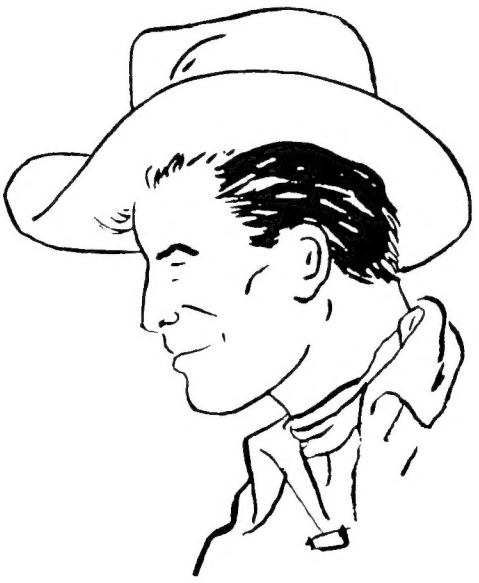
He was armed with dozens of ingenious ways to make himself seem more ghostly. His cloak was pure glowing white on one side, and totally black on the reverse side. On the black underside, a tiny glowing replica of the Ghost Rider's skull mask with stetson had been painted. Confronted by the Ghost Rider's impressive figure, nervous villains were apt to loosen volleys of hot lead in his general direction. A flick of one hand, and the cape reversed itself, hiding the Ghost Rider's form in invisible blackness, while the bullets aimed at the exposed glowing skull face ripped harmlessly thru the cloak. In earlier issues, before the Ghost Rider invented and mastered the use of his blackout cloak, it was taken for granted that "when the heart is pumping fear through the body, the aim is bad...and the eyes play tricks!" and no bullets found their mark. It is fortunate that the aim of villains improved in later issues; a miss to the left or the right of that glowing skull's head would have terminated the Ghost Rider's career early in the series. The Blackout cloak was a much more convincing and interesting explination, and provided other uses as well. By clever manipulation, the Ghost Rider could make parts of his body appear or disappear, or he could seem to disolve into the night air. The abrupt appearance or disappearance of arms, legs, head, two hands holding ready sixguns and the like never failed to add a convincing touch or supernatural ghostliness to the tales.

For the more practical side of crime fighting, the Ghost Rider was armed with two white sixguns which roared out vollies of death in many stories. I consider it somewhat

unghostly for a ghost to use live six-guns, and floor his victims with a stiff right hook, but apparently this made little difference to wrong doers. As the Night Avenger himself put it, "I come from the grave, but my fists are as hard as any man's (WHOP)!", and hot lead and hard fists along with other devices were apt convincers in many a story.

In addition to these standard weapons, the nidnight rider was armed with a coal black lariet, and an extremely long bull whip. These two items, being black and nearly invisible against the night, were used to preform many practical tricks. Artful use of the whip coiled it around a hand or neck, and could be made to seem the grip of Death himself to a villain struck dumb with fear.

Several other weapons saw use in only a story or two, such as his weighted quirt which he welded like a modern-day black-jack, or an adapted morning-star, and knives (the Ghost Rider was a past master in the gentle art of knife throwing, as he proved in several adventures).



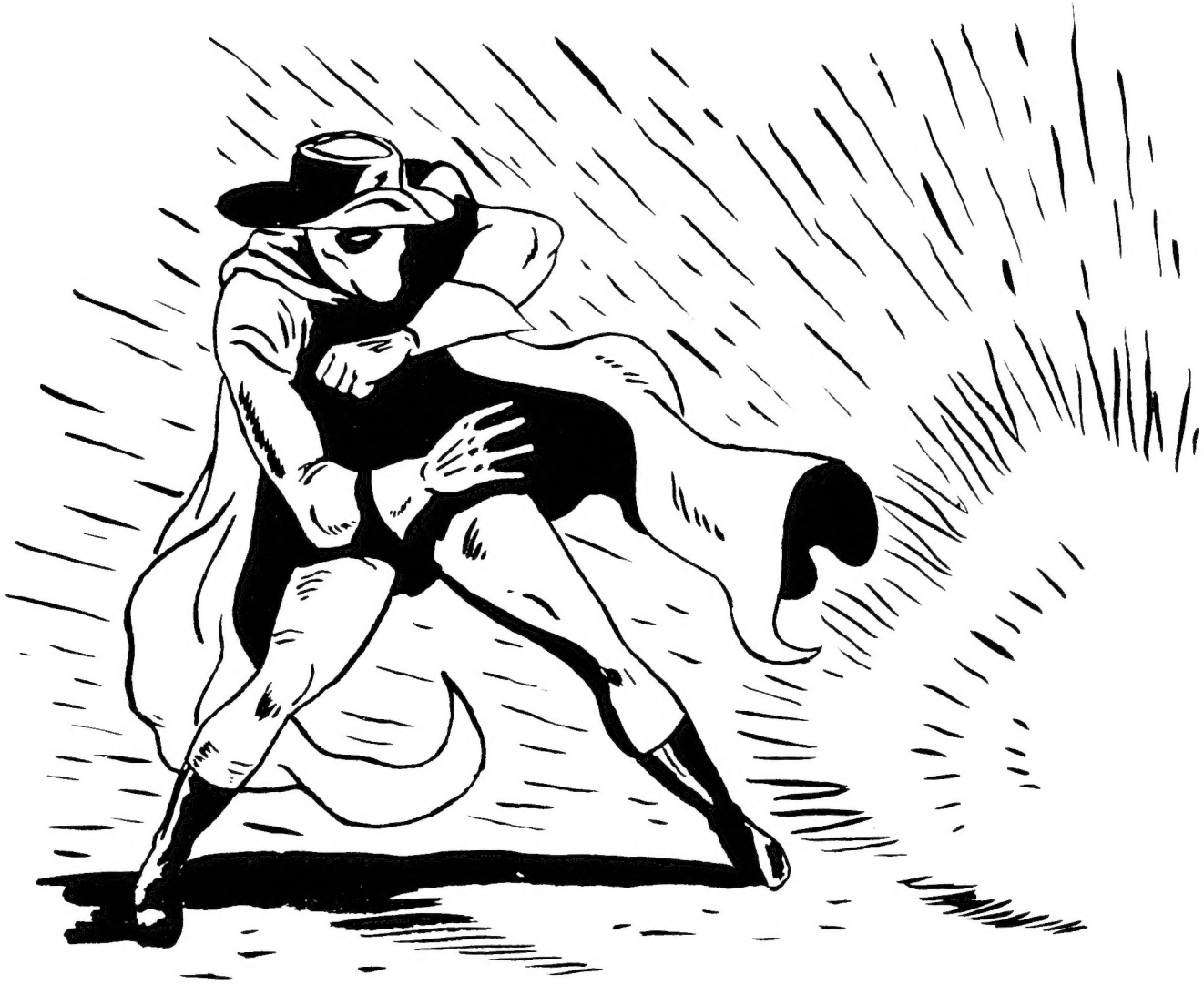
REX FURY, Federal Marshall and Ghost Rider's daylight secret identity

The Ghost Rider spared nothing when it came to creating special effects. Even now these inventions and tools still continue to amaze me. Many would have been practical had some real life character tried to create a real life Ghost Rider. The use of vantriloquism was a favorite trick. Corpses, open graves, images, legal papers and the like could be made to speak up for Justice at the command of the night avenger. A magic lanturn was used in many stories to throw images of demons and weird creatures against the walls of caves or the sides of buildings. The image of the Ghost Rider or parts of his body thrown against a cloud of smoke and riddled with bullets that seemed to do no harm seemed conclusive proof of the hero's supernatural powers. Black line pully systems and a rig attached to his back gave him the ability to fly or float for a few vital seconds. Cotton and gunpowder on thread made fireballs from the heavens, or magic thunder bolts. By removing the soles of his boots and walking on the hob-hails, he is able to walk across a bed of glowing coals without leaving human footprints. Ghost Rider often loaded blanks into villain's weapons, or cloriformed them and hauled them off to grave yards to confront them with open graves, and their own names on the tombstone. Elements from the scene of the crime were conveniently placed everywhere the guily man looked, haunting him into a confession. Clever manipulation of dummies and other parifanilia by Sing Song brought back dead men and horrible demons on command.

The stories were filled with such practical and workable gadgets. The writer and the artist of the stories never attempted to trick the reader; all gimicks were fully explained, tho ocassionally the explination was somewhat unlikely. In one story titled "The Invisible Death", the Ghost Rider managed to force a confession from a murderer by attaching the molded replicas of each murdered man's head to his black lariet, and whirling it around the victim's head. This was a very interesting surprise, since in no story is it noted that the Ghost Rider is a sculpter or any other kind of artist. Likewise it would take a very frightened and a very naieve

villain, as well as considerable skill on Ghost Rider's part to make such a crude trick believable. The story made up for this rather childish clumsiness with its ingenious murder weapon.

Either the Ghost Rider was an extremely popular hero from his first introduction, or else the ME staff and editors had tremendous confidence in his potential greatness, because it wasn't long after his first introduction thru TIM HOLT that he received his own comic. Ghost Rider continued to be featured with one story per issue in TIM HOLT/REDMASK up until issue #50. Every issue of TIM HOLT from #11 until #20 when Tim Holt's alter-identity of Red Mask was introduced, prominently featured on each cover, a proclimation that a complete Ghost Rider story appeared inside. Ghost Rider even managed to win half the cover illustration on #21 of his parent magazine, sharing the other half with the newly introduced Red Mask.



Ghost Rider stories apparently gained quite a bit of popularity. ME issued many other western comics, among them one called BEST OF THE WEST, which featured four of the most popular ME western heroes in each issue. Ghost Rider was a charter member, and along with the Durango Kid, never missed having a story in each issue, tho he only managed to play a prominent part on one issue (#1). All characters received a small spot illustration on the cover, but usually the rest of it was given over to one of the other regulars, Straight Arrow or Red Mask usually. Other regular members of the BEST OF THE WEST crew were Straight Arrow, Durango Kid, Tim Holt/Red Mask, and ocassionally Redhawk. ME also produced a comic called GREAT WESTERN, which featured reprints from various ME western comics, and Ghost Rider was not an unknown visitor to its pages. In addition, Ghost Rider rose to the ranks of trouble shooter. Whenever other ME western comics seemed to show a lag in popularity, it was considered good policy to boost circulation by inserting a story featuring a popular character from another series. For example, BOBBY BENSON'S B-BAR-B RIDERS seemed to be falling off in circulation, due primarily, I believe, to the sudden decline in Powell's usually excellent artwork. Other heroes were brought in to boost circulation again. Issue #13 for instence, featured cover illustrations of the Lemonaid Kid, the Ghost Rider and Red Hawk. The B-Bar-B Riders aren't even mentioned, except in the title, and only one of the four stories inside deals with them. Dick Ayers took over all the artwork for the B-BAR-B with that issue, and Ghost Rider made two more guest appearances in the magazine (in two of my favorite Ghost Rider stories), and his picture was prominently featured in the top left hand corner of #14, and the dominated the cover almost entirely in issue #15.

But all this is a far cry from Ghost Rider's own comic. The first issue of Ghost Rider in his own magazine appeared sometime in 1950. No exact monthly date or publishing schedule was listed in the fine print inside the front cover of that issue. From the artwork inside, however, my guess would be that the comic appeared shortly after Ghost Rider's introduction, possibly coinciding with TIM HOLT 18 or #19. Issue #2 of the comic carries an ad for TIM HOLT #21. My guess would be that the first couple of issues were bi-monthly, then the comic switched over to an admitted quarterly schedule. There were 14 issues of the comic, and one issue drawn up, but never published.

The whole story of the Ghost Rider's origin was retold in that first issue. Only this time a few things were changed. Rex Fury, Federal Marshall and his sidekick Sing Song are attacked by renegade Apachies led by Bart Lasher all right, but the costumes are completely changed, and the action is much more abbriviated. A mere sevel panels were enough to show all the action, as Rex Fury finally drags himself and Sing Song to safety inside the caverin under Devil's Sink. At this point, the story takes an entirely different course. Rex Fury lays on the very borderline of life and death. The ghost of Wild Bill Hickok appears and bids Fury to come with him. Fury is amazed. "It can't be! I'm dreaming! You were shot in 1879 by Jack McCall! You're dead!" "What makes you think you're alive, Rex Fury?" the ghost replies...

Rex Fury is led to other ghosts, Pat Garrett, Kit Carson, Calimity Jane, Billy Tilgiman. They have all appeared to show Rex Fury his Destiny. Evil still reigns thraout the west, even after these valliant men and women laid down their lives fighting for Justice. A new champion for Justice must arise and do battle against the evil that is sweeping over a proud land. Wild Bill Hickok teaches Fury expert pistol marksmanship. Bill Tilgiman teaches him a lightening draw, Calamity Jane teaches him the use of the rifle, while Kit Carson teaches the art of knife throwing and expert woodsmanship. After long practice Rex Fury becomes adapt with his weapons, and after much more time, he manages to capture a great white stallion, which he names Spectre. Presented with a special costume, Rex Fury becomes the

Ghost Rider, and goes forth into the night to stop two argueing prospectors from killing each other. Returning to the caverin under the cliff, he grows dizzy, and awakens to discover that he has never had the adventures, that it was all a dream... except that in the cave with Sing Song and Fury, stands the pure white stallion, proving that the whole incident really took place. And thus the Ghost Rider was born.

Well...that sure wasn't the way it happened in TIM HOLT #11! This story didn't even mention whether or not Bart Lasher got his due and just reward. One wonders too, how Rex Fury ever managed to become a federal marshal if he was in need of such extensive training, the type of training every frontier marshal was susposed to be experienced in. Likewise it could be noted that not a one of his "teacher" could really be called a lily pure fighter for justice. Each and every one of them had a few splotches on their name, and many were called outlaws themselves in other parts of the west. It was a far cry between this mystic origin and that adventure in TIM HOLT #11, when Rex Fury stood in the mouth of the dark caverin and said, "Sing Song, I've got a catchy idea..." sending his own creation into the world. I personally prefer a Ghost Rider whose keen wits and ingenuity sprang from human origin, rather than a Ghost Rider who owed a part of his sucess to true supernatural beginnings.

But even with the doctored origin, the Ghost Rider's comic was off to a brilliant start. And it was to become an excellent comic indeed. The upmost attention and care was taken with the artwork. While the art in TIM HOLT and BEST OF THE WEST ocassionally still spoke of a hurried style, the work in GHOST RIDER was always adapt, and carefully treated for the maximum visual impression. The color work as well as the black and white work was treated with firm and careful attention, least some imperfection mar the otherwise perfect standards. The stories were no slouch either. The very finest in hybrid western-weird adventures found their way into the pages of THE GHOST RIDER. The stories with the most fascinating supernatural overtones, those with the most interplay between two vibrant human forces, and those which allowed for a maximum of spectacular art and high weird adventure were used. The supernatural dominated the magazine, and every store bore a tale of weirdness requiring skills only the Ghost Rider could cope with.

Here too, in the seventh issue, were the first "Tales of the Ghost Rider" introduced. These were supurbly drawn and executed stories of a definitely supernatural nature, set in strong western backgrounds. There was no natural or human explination behind the strange happenings in these tales; the werewolves, vampires demons and supernatural events mentioned were all without human origin or direction. These stories proved conclusively that it was possible for honest supernatural fiction to be sucessfully set into the background of a western tale. These along with the Ghost Rider stories themselves, bridged the gap between the western story and the supernatural tale, without crudeness or undue blood and gore usually associated with such attempts.

The whole Ghost Rider series, indeed, all the ME comics I've come in contact with, were remarkably prudish when it came to such matters. ME presented honest entertainment, without needless blood and gore. When featuring weird or supernatural stories in a comic book, the temptation is all to strong to substitute raw violence and stomack turning horror scenes for honest suspense, and some comic publishing companies did sucumb to this temptation. While the ME writers were not above having an ocassional villain or hero catching slugs in the guts, and the artists weren't above showing a small pool of blood beside a body turned face downward against a hard wooden floor, I seriously doubt that any person judging such matters objectively could accuse ME of undesirable comic practices.

A few words here about the artwork in the series need to be said. There are many adjectives that could be used to describe the excellence it achieved, most of

them are totally inadequate to convay to the reader who has never encountered the fine line detail work, the brilliant, well done human faces, the overall completeness the art achieved. Ayers developed his style from the crude, blocking, undetailed traditional comic art common to the field, into a moving marvel of spectacular black and white combinations. I don't know whether Ayers did the color work for his own creation, but if he did then he deserves another laural, for the truly brilliant and impressive color combinations he achieved.

Ayers was especially effective with his background settings and the faces of his characters. There are stories in which the background is merely incidental or commonplace, but these barron, sterile examples are far outweighed by the stories in which the background art runs amuk, and grows out of the comic page until it engulfs the reader, literally pulling him into the setting. Trees and woodlands, along with western town settings were Ayers's best backgrounds, where detail and prespective could be adapted for maximum effect.

Ayers's villains and facial studies were also a strong point. His villains looked like villains when one takes the time to study them. This is not to say that his villains were loud mouthed cigar smoking bullies, or town gamblers with thin black mustaches and black undertakers' coats, or any of the other sterotypes of western villainery we have come to accept. The Ghost Rider series was remarkably free of these sterotyped creations. But Dick Ayers had and has a very valuable talent; he is able to paint raw emotion and inner conflict on the faces of all his characters. Greed, cruelity, self pride, terror, horror, weakness, domineering power, were all pictured as the ocassion demanded, all in beautiful life-like style that could hardly be criticisized, and left little doubt as to the innter emotion of the character. Surprisingly enough, however, Ghost Rider villains were seldom easy to detect in a story. True enough that hard faced characters roamed the pages, but the faces were so well adapted, and the story plots so well constructed, that many villains aren't suspected until they make the expected give-away slip, reveal-themselves, as was undoubtedly planned, in their true character to the readers.

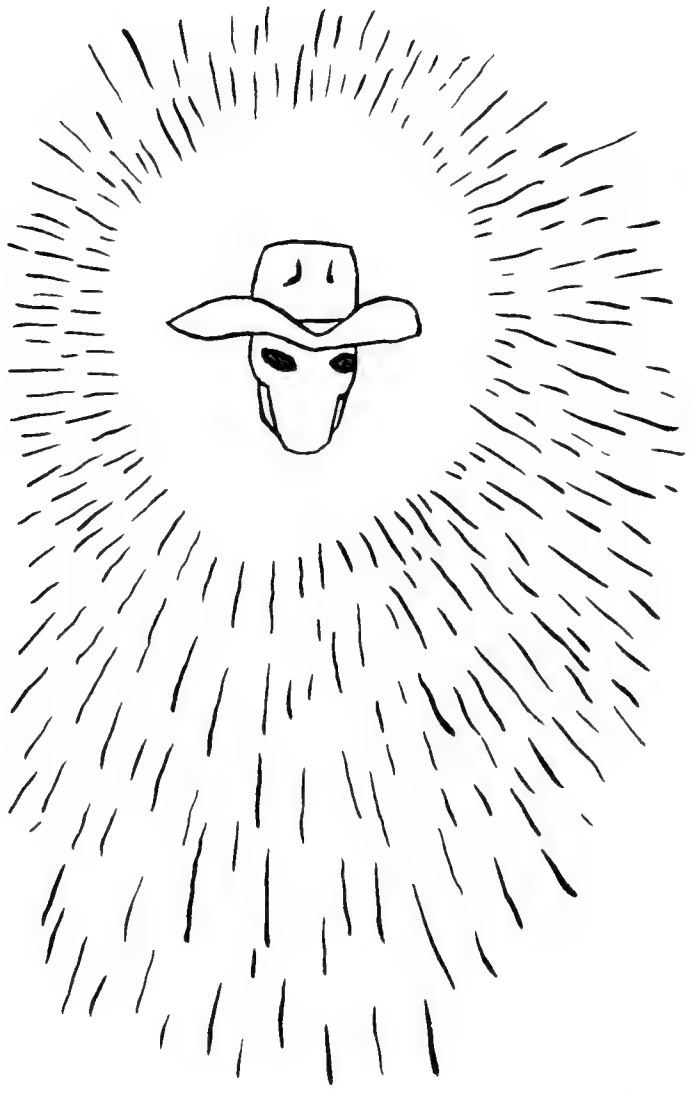
Like most artists, Ayers had a few favorite poses and a few favorite characters and backgrounds. One of his most effective poses, which he used and still uses in his artwork, shows the barrel of a gun pointed straight out of the page at the reader, with a villain's face leveled behind it, a mask of cruelity marring his features. A varriation on this theme is the gun which is exploding, barrel pointed straight at the reader, with only the mouth of the barrel and part of the hand visible thru the flash of the exploding shell. Ayers seemed to be fond of a couple of his hard faced villains, and used them in several different stories. The costumes and the background changed, but these villains did not.

There are really only two criticisms that could be made of Ayers's

handling of the series. He never seemed to do extremely well with the faces of women, at least not with women who weren't villains. The faces were competent, but paled when compared with the surrounding artwork. Then too, he tended and still tends to use the same blond haired woman constantly, story after story after story, with only minor changes in costuming. The body proportions of his characters were sometimes exaggerated, and while it never reached the stage it did with the Avenger, which Ayers also illustrated, there were times when he threw his characters into impossible positions, and exagerrated the proportions of their legs and arms and other parts of their bodies. The effect gained made them look not unlike the MAD satire creations. But these two criticisms are certainly minor ones when compared against the over-all excellence of the artwork.

The Ghost Rider stories themselves, as I have already indicated, were well plotted and developed. Unlike most comic stories, Ghost Rider tales made an attempt not only at character development of the central hero, but development of the character of the villain into something more than a cardboard menace which the hero can knock around for the sheer sake of heroics.

In the first tryout issue of HAWKMAN early last year, Hawkman battled against



Byth, a super thief from Thanagar, but a thief whose sole aim was the thrill of thievery; the pure emotional joy that stealing and besting the police gave him. On Hawkman's home world, a thief who managed to escape the law gained fame and public admiration, and altho the comic didn't mention it, one imagines that Thanagar has a statue of limitations, so that after a definite period of time, the sucessful criminal could step forth and bask in his own glory, without being prosecuted by the law.

This outlook of criminals typifies the comic villains of our present day, and probably of many criminals in past comic book history. There is really no motive for the crimes the modern day villains commit, except to boost the ego and to best the super hero, thereby becoming admired by the public. When Abra Kadaba battles Flash, he carries this modern criminal theory one step further, and demands applause from his victims as he robs them. Human Torch's battles with the Wizard, a villain who has everything a normal human being could desire, is an extreme example of the egotism in villains that has run amuk thruout comic books of this day.

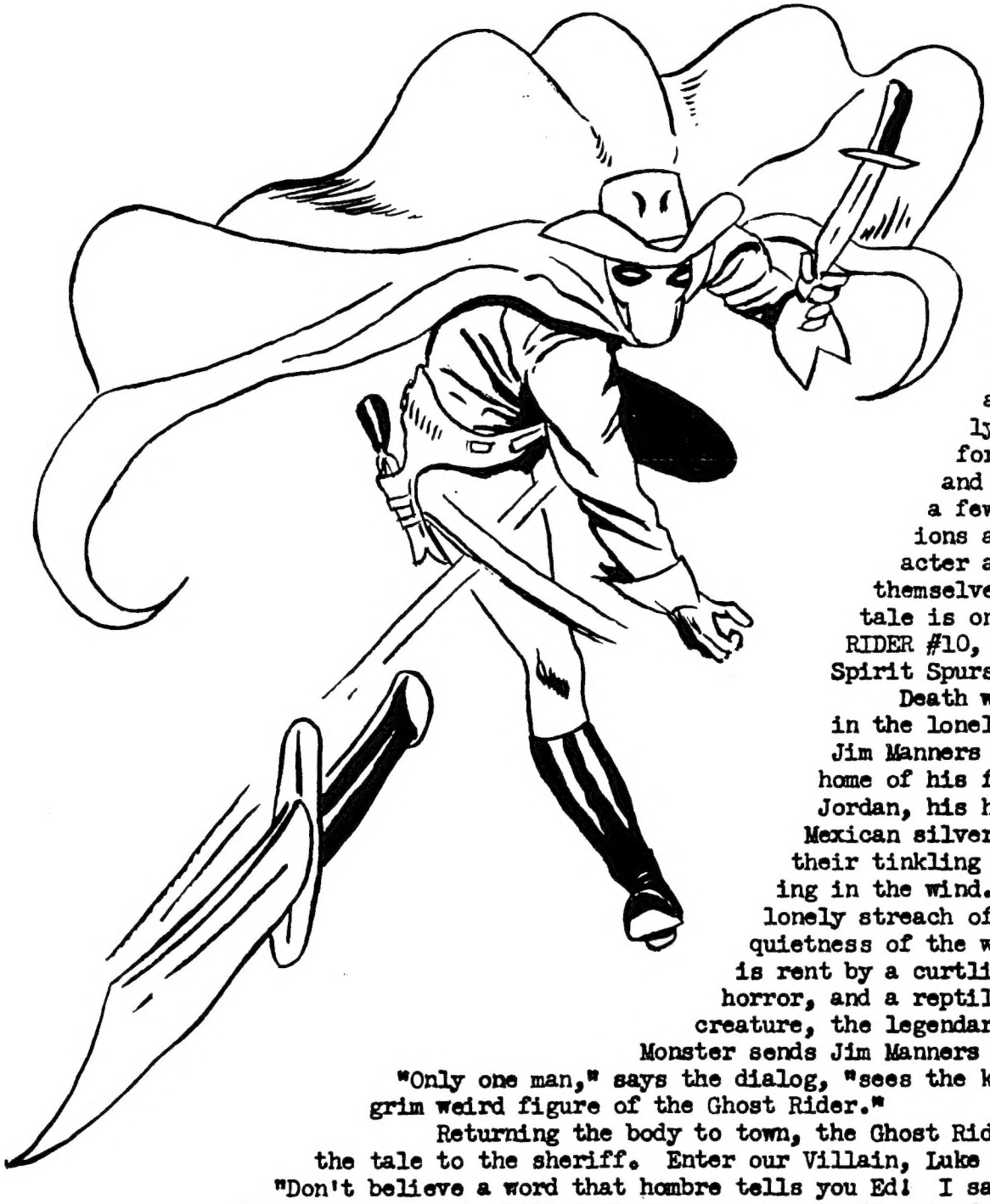
This was certainly not the case with the Ghost Rider. Ghost Rider's villains were real people. They weren't dandies and thrill seekers, nor were they self centered egotists. They were dislikable, dispicable, greedy men and women who decided that the law stood in the way between them and easy money. Each and every one of them had pure human greed on his mind as he battled the forces of justice and left his tangle of murder and thievery behind him. There were no thrill seekers in a Ghost Rider story, only cruel, selfish individuals whose lust for power and ease led a bloody path to crime. Don Esteban Solato wanted Spanish gold, and didn't care how many dead bodies lay in his path. Roger Boofer wanted complete ownership of the valley ranches, and what difference did it make if he had to murder his three best friends to get it? White Fawn, the scheming Indian maiden, wanted pure and absolute power, and riches beyond her dreams, and if her weird talking head spoke a trail of butchered white settlers, well, it was none of her concern. There were no rematches in a Ghost Rider story; when a villain met the Ghost Rider he was either finished, or he escaped and lived happily ever after on his evil earnings. A villain was a villain, and none of them were very liable people. I can remember only one villain that aroused even

the faintest tinges of sympathy, one out of the entire series.

Like most comic book stories, the Ghost Rider tales adhered to a more or less broad sterotype pattern. It was an infinitely flexable pattern, one that could be twisted, changed, adapted and shifted so cleverly that the reader would seldom, if ever, be able to connect one story plot with another unless he was looking for such comparisons. But out of a series which ran (if the numbering system beneath the artist's name in each blurp pannel is to be believed, and I see no reason why it shouldn't be), at least 118 separate stories, certain basic motivating principles become evident.

There were certain things which made a Ghost Rider story a Ghost Rider story. First, there must be a definite menace, almost always a menace with supernatural overtones, one which cannot, on the surface, be explained by normal scientific laws. This supernatural menace must frighten, baffle, terrify, and kill, arousing Justice, in the form of the Ghost Rider, to pit keen wits against it. This menace must have human direction, or at least human profit somewhere in its activities. Usually there was both human direction and human profit involved in the menace. Human direction provides us with a flesh and blood villain to do battle against. The Ghost Rider must then encounter the menace, feel it out, become acquainted with the nature of its threat and susposed powers. Next the Ghost Rider must employ his intelligence (as opposed to thud and blunder stupidity or sheer accident, common with certain other comic titles one could name), to discover the human villain who gains by this susposed supernatural activity, and how the menace operates or is being used and directed, and why. Next of course, the Ghost Rider must employ some cunning method of forcing a confession from the worthless wrong doer, or he must produce conclusive evidence of the villain's guilt.

Basically, these are the factors that make up a Ghost Rider story, stripped bare to the bones. Around this fragile seeming framework have been built many a powerful comic story, tales that impress themselves on the memory and cannot be forgotten. In order to gain a little more insight into the basics of a Ghost Rider tale, let's choose one which



adheres strongly, almost fanaticly to the basic formula framework, and from this draw a few more conclusions about the character and the stories themselves. Such a tale is one from GHOST RIDER #10, titled "The Spirit Spurs".

Death waits silently in the lonely night, as Jim Manners leaves the home of his friend, Luke Jordan, his hand made Mexican silver spurs, with their tinkling bells, sounding in the wind. Along a lonely streach of road, the quietness of the western night is rent by a curtling scream of horror, and a reptilian man-like creature, the legendary Brasada Monster sends Jim Manners to his death. "Only one man," says the dialog, "sees the killer; the grim weird figure of the Ghost Rider."

Returning the body to town, the Ghost Rider relates the tale to the sheriff. Enter our Villain, Luke Jordan. "Don't believe a word that hombre tells you Ed! I saw the whole thing! The one who killed Jim Manners is standing in front of you! You don't believe his loco story of a monster do you!" His good sense taking the better of him, the sheriff decides to lock Ghost Rider away pending further investigation. "Foolish sheriff! No jail can hold the Ghost Rider!"

It might be well to mention here that the Ghost Rider was rather fond of archaic and meladramatic speech. It seemed to add to his alien ghostliness never to use contractions, never to use slang, and to use phrases which seemed to the reader to be slightly stilted and outdated. Ocassionally this archaic and meladramatic language got out of hand. From another story in the same issue, the

watchful reader can come across this deathless sentence of prose, "The foul fiend waits for word from his minions...He shall not savor the news of their exposure!" In all fairness to the writers and the character, it was seldom that meladramatic dialog managed to get that far out of hand, but ocassionally some rather humorous examples popped up.

Locked away in a cell, the Ghost Rider prepares his escape. A ghostly voice rings out, telling the sheriff that the Ghost Rider's promice has been fulfilled. Amazed, the sheriff finds the cell empty, tho the doors and windows are still locked and barred, and the guard below has seen no one pass. News of the mysterious escape spreads like wildfire, but as the dialog says, Luke Jordon has other problems. He has managed to buy up Manner's stage line, and is preparing to sell the transportation franchiese to the railway which is coming thru. But greed gets the better of him, and he decides to rob the passengers and the shippers of his own stage line in order to reap more gains.

The Brasada Monster strikes, his reptilian shape is seen often along the night traveled stage routes, his eerie scream stampedes the horses, and makes the coaches easy pray for masked highwaymen. But on one such expedition, masked robbers are met by the sight of a glowing skull floating in the air, the calling card of the Ghost Rider. Clever manipulation of his black lariat soaked with phospherous and set ablaze, together with the terrified fear of the villains convinces them that the Ghost Rider has directed rings of fire against them.

Back at the Bar-9 Ranch, Luke Jordon prepares a welcome for the Ghost Rider, as his henchmen report the strange happening. "Beneath the Bar-9 Ranch house, in the stone vaults that were once a part of a Spanish mission, a hinge creaks rustily", and the monster rises, to be confronted immediately by the midnight avenger. Ghostly hands and reptilian skin meet, a viscious battle ensues, and Ghost Rider sends the monster crashing against the wall, tearing a piece of skin from the fleeing thing.

"These are the stagecoach robbers sheriff! They have been working hand and glove with Luke Jordon! But I can't prove anything!" But the sheriff is willing to believe anything Ghost Rider says, after executing his escape. (Little does the sheriff know, Ghost Rider thinks to himself, that by reversing his blackout cloak and hidding under the bunk, the darkened shadows made the cell appear empty. The sheriff left the cell door open, and Ghost Rider merely walked away in the confusion).

But the Ghost Rider forms a cunning plan which will expose Jordon for the thief and murderer he is. That night, a glowing skull appears at Jordon's window... "Luke Jordon, you shall not sleep this night, nor any other night hereafter! Posing as the Brasada Monster, you killed Jim Manners..." Horrified, Jordon denies all. "Listen closely Luke Jordon, listen closely..." And thruout the room comes the haunting sound of tiny tinkling silver bells, bells such as were worn on the spurs of Jim Manners, spirit spurs that in the coming day, follow Luke Jordon wherever he walks, wherever he rides. Almost driven mad by the constant sound of the haunting spirit spurs, Jordon makes a confession. The spirit spurs? As Ghost Rider himself explains, "It was a simple matter to 'haunt' him! I merely hollowed out the heels of his boots and inserted these tiny bells! Wherever he went, he heard them---and imagined that Jim Manners and his spirit spurs followed him!"

All good things must come to an end sooner or later, and so it was that GHOST RIDER magazine vanished from the newstands, and eventually faded from the pages of TIM HOLT/RED MASK COMICS. The last issue of RED MASK I own which carried a Ghost Rider story is number 50. The next issue is #51, and the cover carries this legend, "Introducing the magic of THE PRESTO KID". Somewhere along the line, the Ghost Rider breathed his last.

We trust that his passing was an honorable death, as befitted one such as he. Yet, what casued it? What forced the midnight avenger into the limbo which called

him forth? Since Dick Ayers did the artwork for the Presto Kid, it seems unlikely that he and ME had a disagreement causing the folding of their most brilliant creation. Perhaps the Ghost Rider's eternal empire of wide eyed raders had crumbled, leaving only the Faithful to sustain his popularity. Perhaps Ayers himself grew tired of his character, and put him away in favor of another one, akin, but not like the original. Or perhaps ME felt that the old times had passed, that western comics were on the lull, and that heroes such as the Ghost Rider no longer attracted the public enthusiasm. Whatever the reasons, the Ghost Rider disappeared, to rest finally in the darkness that was his trademark.

No more would the midnight avenger send his firey horse out into the night shrouded wilderness, calling upon Justice and his keen wits to do him aid in his eternal battle against evil. No more would comic readers thrill to his challenge from beyond, the weirdly pleasant meladramatics that marked this, one of the most unusual and wonderful of western characters.

But perhaps all is not lost. For evil still reigns thruout the west, and evil doers still walk the streets of frontier towns, unpunished. Perhaps soon the cries of the oppressed victims will stur slumbering Justice, and Justice will call forth its masked champion from his cold grave once more, as it did long years ago, and the Ghost Rider will live again.